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TAGS: PREL PINR PTER ET ER

SUBJECT: MORE DETAILS: KIDNAPPED EUROPEANS RELEASE IN ERITREA

REF: A) ASMARA 282 B) 070649Z MAR 07 ASMARA IIR 6 908

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR SCOTT H. DELISI, FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: On March 14, British Embassy officials provided additional details about the kidnapping and release of the five Europeans by the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF). The British officials also shared a report issued by the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) which outlined its efforts to secure the release of the kidnapped Europeans. The report indicates that the GSE had knowledge and access to the abductees as early as March 6, although the Eritreans shared no information with the British Embassy until notification of the release and travel of the abductees to Asmara on March 13. Despite the GSE's lack of transparency in communication with the British and French Embassies and despite the questions lingering around possible linkages between the GSE and the ARDUF, there is no indication at this time that Eritrea was involved in any way with the kidnapping, and in fact, the GSE appears overall to have played a proactive role in facilitating the release of the abductees. End Summary.

THE ACCOUNT FROM THE ABDUCTEES

¶2. (C) On March 1, in an ARDUF raid on a tax office in Hamidella, Ethiopia, the five Europeans and thirteen Ethiopians were, seemingly, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. One of the Europeans reported that, during the raid, an ARDUF rebel appeared surprised by the presence of the foreigners in the area and signaled to them to go away. The leader of the ARDUF attack overruled this decision, however, and detained the thirteen Ethiopians and five Europeans. The Europeans reported that the Ethiopians in their tour group appeared to recognize the kidnappers, through tribal or clan affiliation but not through any complicity in the kidnapping. The Ethiopians were able to translate what was happening for the Europeans from Afar and Amharic into English. The ARDUF kidnappers provided the abductees with their manifesto at the start of their detention, leaving the Europeans no doubt as to the identity

and agenda of the group from the outset.

¶3. (C) After capture, the group was marched for the next four to five days through flat terrain. During this time, ARDUF permitted four of the Ethiopians to leave the group. One of the Europeans reported that on Day 2 of their march, the ARDUF leader announced they were now in Eritrea. On the fifth day (probably March 5), they arrived at a location which the British Embassy believes to be the ARDUF headquarters near, or in, the locality of Wandidel. From there, they were marched to a wadi (dried river bed) with an oasis several hours away. The group stayed there until Monday, March 12, spending the days in the oasis and nights on top of a barren plateau to evade the mosquitoes in the oasis. (Note: The kidnap victims also reported the oasis was located near a cemetery. End note.)

¶4. (C) On March 12, the Europeans were informed they were being released. Prior to their departure from Wandidel, they attempted to give shoes and other supplies to the nine Ethiopian hostages who remained behind, however, they were prevented from doing so by their ARDUF kidnappers. The five were then transported by car with members of the ARDUF to an Eritrean military camp. The Europeans said that the ARDUF members appeared to know, and be friendly with, Eritrean military members stationed at the camp. At 1100, an Eritrean helicopter arrived at the camp. The Europeans were loaded into the helicopter and, at approximately 1530, departed the camp for Asmara. Accompanying them in the helicopter were the Sultan of the Eritrean Afar, three other Afar leaders, and the leader of ARDUF. Upon arrival in Asmara, the Sultan and the Afar leaders remained with the European hostages but the ARDUF leader was swept away by Eritrean officials, a group which reportedly included a representative from President Isaias' office. The hostages were taken into the

care of the British Embassy until their departure for Addis, via Djibouti on March 14. The group was scheduled to fly to London from Addis Ababa on March 15.

THE ERITREANS ACCOUNT

¶5. (S/NF) The GSE presented to the British Embassy a written account of its efforts to secure the release of the Europeans. The account made it clear that the Eritreans had been in communication with ARDUF since Tuesday, March 6 and had full knowledge of both the abductees, location and physical conditions. (Note: As reported reftel B, the GSE had notified the British and French Ambassadors on March 6 that they had learned of the location of the abductees in Ethiopia and would try to arrange for their release. End Note.) The GSE provided no further information to the British and French Embassies until contacting the British Ambassador on March 13, to inform him of the abductees, release and expected arrival in Asmara that evening.

¶6. (S/NF) The GSE report said that the GSE learned on Tuesday, March 6 that the kidnapped group was located in Wandidel (Wayima), 30 kilometers south of the Eritrean border. The GSE then contacted three Afar Sultans of the region: Sultan Abudulkader of Rahaita, Sultan Shahira of Bada and Sultan Mohamed Abdella of Aiyum. Through these intermediaries, the GSE requested a March 7 meeting with ARDUF at Oasa Gala, 10 kilometers south of the Eritrean border in Ethiopian territory. Initially, ARDUF refused. However, on March 8, a group of Afar elders met and applied pressure on ARDUF to negotiate with the GSE. On March 9, an Eritrean doctor was granted permission to see the abductees. (Note: The Europeans confirmed they saw the doctor on Saturday, March 10. If the GSE claim as to the location of the abductees at that time is accurate, then the Eritrean had to cross the border into Ethiopia to see them. End note.) The Europeans reported that they were aware that negotiations were ongoing for their release, which they believe is a likely reason for their earlier transfer to the oasis away from the camp where the Eritreans, Afar and ARDUF were

reportedly meeting.

¶7. (S/NF) The GSE reports that during the negotiations, the ARDUF presented three political demands. First, ARDUF wanted political recognition for the organization. Secondly, they sought restitution for the salt mines taken over by the Ethiopian government. Thirdly, they wanted the Government of Ethiopia to reimburse the Afar for salt harvested in the past few years. The GSE reports that it dismissed ARDUF's demands and continued to press for the Europeans, release and further claims that ARDUF eventually bowed to the pressure of the Afar elders⁸ and agreed to hand over the abductees. On March 12, the European were returned to Wandidel and traveled by car to Aiyumin in Eritrea) a 45 kilometer ride that took 2 hours of travel. They arrived in Aiyumin at ¶1900. The next day they traveled to Asmara by helicopter.

COMMENT

¶8. (S/NF) The GSE played a facilitating role in the release of the European abductees and for that the British, French, and Italian Ambassadors are all grateful. However, all of us are puzzled, to say the least, by the fact that the GSE appeared to know first-hand of the abducted group's location and of their physical status for at least seven days prior to their release and yet offered no additional information to any of the concerned Embassies in Asmara. Two possible explanations offered by our British colleagues for the GSE's reticence to coordinate more closely include the Eritreans, fear of losing face should their efforts prove unsuccessful and possible GSE concerns that the British government might use the information to attempt a rescue of the abductees using force. A third explanation is that the Eritreans were just being themselves, i.e., difficult to deal with and insensitive or oblivious to how their actions would be

perceived. As noted reftels, Post has no basis for believing that the GSE either ordered or orchestrated the kidnapping -- nor, despite its likely ties to ARDUF, do we have any reason to believe that the GSE could have taken any further actions to resolve the situation more expeditiously than it did. The GSE has, however, managed to turn a potentially positive bridge-building opportunity with the Western nations into one where we will continue to harbor questions and doubts about the Eritrean role, even if they truly acted constructively on behalf of the abductees. END COMMENT.

DeLisi